DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 061 RC 024 125

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TITLE	Improving Graduation Outcomes for Migrant Students. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Charleston, WV.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-RC-03-2
PUB DATE	2003-07-00
NOTE	4p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0027
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.ael.org/eric.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Disadvantaged; Dropout Prevention; *Educational Environment; High Risk Students; High School Students; High Schools; Mexican American Education; Mexican Americans; *Migrant Education; *School Holding Power; *Social Support Groups; *Student School Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; Migrant Education Program; *Student Support Services

ABSTRACT

This digest explores several key factors that contribute to the academic persistence and achievement of migrant high school students. The discussion draws from research on one California high school and from the literature on promoting educational success for working-class minority youth. National studies have estimated that only about half of migrant students receive a high school diploma. In contrast, 77 percent of the migrant students who entered the study school ("Hillside") in 1998 graduated in 2002. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to follow the school performance from 9th through 12th grade of all 160 migrant students in the class of 2002. Most of these students were from Mexican-origin families, lived in impoverished conditions, had parents with limited education and English proficiency, and were behind academically when they entered Hillside. Findings suggest that these students' success was due largely to conditions created by Migrant Education Program (MEP) staff. MEP staff provided a wide array of academic support services, such as academic guidance, tutoring, supplemental instruction, access to computers, and college counseling. Just as important, MEP staff created a sense of belonging and community for migrant students, helped students develop supportive relationships with school staff and other students, reached out to encourage parent participation, and supported a migrant student association that asserted a positive Mexican presence in the wider school community. (SV)

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ED 478 061

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EDO-RC-03-2 July 2003

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EDO-RC-03-2 July 2003

Improving Graduation Outcomes for Migrant Students

Margaret A. Gibson

This Digest explores several key factors that contribute to the academic persistence and achievement of high-school-aged migrant youth. The discussion draws from research in one California high school and from the broader literature on promoting educational success for working-class minority youth.

Background of Study

As of July 2002, there were 819,000 migrant children nationwide.[1] These children are among the most disadvantaged in the United States due to the combined effects of poverty, poor nutrition and health care, and high absenteeism from school related to work responsibilities and family mobility. To be eligible for migrant services, a child must have moved from one school district to another within the past three years to obtain temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fishing, or to accompany a parent or guardian seeking this kind of work. Secondary students who no longer migrate may continue to be serviced through credit accrual programs until graduation.

Many migrant children fall behind academically as they progress through school. The best and most recent national studies of school completion rates (now more than a decade old) estimated that only about half received a high school diploma (State University of New York [SUNY] Oneonta Migrant Programs, 1987; Vamos, 1992). By contrast, 77% of the migrant students who entered the study school, Hillside High School (HHS), in the fall of 1998 completed 12th grade 4 years later; another 8% remained in school pursuing a GED.[2] In a comparison sample of nonmigrant Mexican-descent students, only 39% graduated from high school on schedule.

Hillside High School is one of two public high schools in the Appleton Unified School District. It serves students from two distinct communities: Appleton, a predominantly Mexican and Mexican American working-class community, the economy of which is based largely on agriculture; and Hillside, a mostly White, middle- to upper-middle-class professional town.

Most of the migrant students in the focal sample lived in Appleton and were bused each day to Hillside due to severe overcrowding at Appleton High School. Like their counterparts nationwide, Appleton's migrant workers faced severe hardships that impacted their children's schooling. Three fourths of the parents had attended school for 8 years or less, mostly in rural Mexico, and few of the parents spoke English with ease. As a result, many of the parents were unable to assist their children with schoolwork, particularly in the upper grades.

Furthermore, the average migrant laborer in Appleton earned just $9,000 picking and packing fruits and vegetables during the 5-month agricultural season. Those with more skilled and steady work (for example, tractor drivers or crew foremen) still earned less than $20,000 annually. Given the very high cost of housing, almost all Appleton migrant families lived in poverty. Nearly half left the area each December when unemployed, many returning to Mexico. About 20% of their children missed at least some school days during January.

The School and Students

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the author and her coresearchers followed the school performance of all 160 HHS migrant students in the Class of 2002 from 9th through 12th grades. Sources of data included extensive participant observation at the high school; student surveys; and interviews with students, teachers, and Migrant Education Program staff. Also gathered were data on students' grades, credits earned, college preparatory courses completed, and their ongoing enrollment status in high school.

By the time they entered HHS, most migrant students were behind academically. Only one third were placed directly into college prep English and math classes. Most also coped with a sense of not belonging at HHS. As one migrant student explained, "You feel that you don't fit in. Just . . . passing through the quad, they [White students] don't even notice you. And it's like you don't belong there. It's weird." While White students and teachers might have regretted the social divisions and tensions that existed between student groups, few had any real comprehension of the lives of the migrant students outside of school or the deep sense of exclusion they experienced in school (Gibson & Bejínez, 2002).

Factors Supporting Student Success

Despite the many obstacles, most HHS migrant students graduated from high school. Evidence from the study suggested that their success was due in large part to several conditions created by the Migrant Education Program (MEP) staff, including the provision of supplemental academic support, creation of a sense of belonging, development of supportive relationships, and strengthening of home-school-community links.

Providing institutional and academic support. The MEP staff provided a wide array of supplemental academic support services, including:

- constant academic guidance to assure that students took all courses required for high school graduation
- after-school tutoring
- summer school and supplemental course work for students who needed to make up courses or credits

[1] F. Sabbah, Director, Migrant Education Region XI, personal communication, July 23, 2002.

[2] The research was made possible through generous grants from the U.S. Department of Education/OERI (#R305T990174) and the Spencer Foundation (MG #199900129). As a condition of conducting this study and gaining access to student records, the high school and students were promised anonymity. Accordingly, all names are pseudonyms.

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- computers, printers, and Internet access
- placements in paid after-school jobs
- college counseling and precollege transition support
- ongoing advocacy and mentoring
- connections to other school resources

Creating a sense of belonging and community. For many working-class minority students, developing a caring relationship with a teacher or some other adult at school is essential to creating a sense of school membership (Valenzuela, 1997). Moreover, a feeling of belonging in school appears to be a precondition to academic motivation, participation, and achievement (Gonzalez & Padilla, 1997; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Osterman, 2000). A sense of belonging may be especially important for migrant students due to the status differences that exist between them and members of the dominant society, their high rate of absenteeism, and the disconnect that they experience between home and school culture.

The MEP office at HHS provided a place where migrant students felt comfortable gathering for social as well as academic reasons. The walls were covered with symbols of Mexican culture and pictures of former students and their college acceptance letters. Students felt free to speak in Spanish or in English, and during lunch time the migrant staff often played Spanish music. In many ways, the MEP office served as a social and cultural *safe space* for students (Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997), a location where they could enjoy a positive and warm sense of community, often absent to them in the larger school setting.

Migrant educators often served as surrogate parents, and they worked constantly to build and maintain a sense of shared trust and friendship with the students. MEP teachers routinely spoke with students about their futures and discussed alternatives to a life working in the fields. Moreover, as one student commented, "They pay attention to your problems and help you out." We found caring relationships between migrant staff and students to be at the very heart of the program's success (for more details, see Gibson & Bejínez, 2002).

Developing supportive relationships. A sense of caring and community is necessary but alone is insufficient to promote academic persistence and achievement among economically marginalized migrant youth. Children raised in poverty often lack access to the kinds of social relationships with teachers and college-bound schoolmates that can provide them with resources needed for academic success. In such cases, educational programs must themselves be structured in ways that provide these in-school connections and support (Stanton-Salazar, Vasquez, & Mehan, 2000).

Like many of their counterparts nationwide (Perry, 1997), the migrant educators at HHS had a deep understanding of the students' lives outside of school and their educational needs—an understanding developed in many instances from staff members' own backgrounds as former migrants. This helped them to connect with the students and to develop relationships as trusted mentors, tutors, role models, counselors, and advocates.

Linking home, school, and community. Students who believe they must conceal parts of their identity at school, or who feel pressure to shed their home cultures, are likely to experience a sense of alienation at school (Gibson, 1998). On the other hand, when students feel their identities are affirmed, they are more likely to engage in the schooling process.

Understanding this, the HHS migrant educators actively worked to validate the important relationships that existed among students' home, community, and school worlds. For example, they maintained close contact with parents through phone calls, home visits, and special events designed to attract parent participation. Additionally, they met individually with parents to review their children's academic progress. They also encouraged students to become involved in school and community activities through the work of the Migrant Student Association (MSA), a student-run club whose mission was to promote higher education, organize school and community service activities, and celebrate cultural differences. As students explained, "We feel wanted and we feel part of the school by doing activities with MSA."

MSA was an important site for creating, sustaining, and asserting a positive Mexican presence within the larger HHS school community. The club also served to promote peer support and forge a bond among its members through members' shared linguistic and ethnic backgrounds and the club's many activities. Through their participation in MSA, students came to associate being Mexican with leadership and academic achievement (Gibson, Bejínez, Hidalgo, & Rolón, in press).

Conclusion

MEP offered a space, both as a physical site and as a set of relationships, that served to nurture migrant students' evolving identities and to provide them with access to the kinds of institutional support required for school success. It created an academic and social community that fostered school engagement and participation. MEP enabled migrant students to maintain and develop their cultural roots and values while also being successful in school. Students were encouraged to become proficient in English as well as Spanish and to gain mastery of the dominant European American culture while sustaining strong roots within their Mexican community.

MEP helped those most at risk of dropping out to both persist in school and prepare for college, including students who never previously viewed this as a real possibility.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0027. The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of IES, the Department, or AEL.

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